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NFS transition expected to take a year

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ERWIN Representatives of Babcock & Wilcox, the presumptive new owner of Nuclear Fuel Services, told employees and Unicoi County officials in meetings the past two days that the complete transition should last about a year, participants in the meetings said Thursday.

According to NFS spokesman Tony Treadway, the delegation of four from B&W met with employees in groups on Wednesday and Thursday. At lunch Thursday, B&W representatives talked to Mayors Greg Lynch of Unicoi County, Brushy Lewis of Erwin and Johnny Lynch of Unicoi, Economic Development Board Executive Director Doris Hensley, and Schools Director Denise Brown.

I was pleased with them, Johnny Lynch said. They seem like very down-to-earth, good people (who were) easy to talk to (and) laid back. They were very cordial. Theyre very optimistic. The message that I got was that things will basically be the same as far as the goings-on at the plant.

Last week, NFS and B&W, who have been competitors, announced they had reached an agreement for the purchase, which they hope to finalize by the end of the year. Treadway said the two companies are waiting for approval from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. The purchase price was not disclosed. B&W has said the NFS facility and its current operations will remain in Erwin. No layoffs were anticipated and no changes will be made to the union contract. Johnny Lynch said B&W has unions within its company.

The Erwin plant will come under the umbrella of NOGERwin Holdings Inc., an affiliate of B&W.

B&W officials did not speak with the media during their time in Erwin. Treadway said company officials did not want to meet with the media until the sale was final.

Treadway and Lynch said B&W indicated the transition would take about a year to finish. That will entail details such as making computer systems compatible as well as other integration issues, Treadway said.

He said leadership issues were not addressed other than a comment that NFS President and Chief Executive Officer Dwight Ferguson and General Manager Tim Lindstrom would be very important during the transition. Ferguson has said he plans to retire in April.

B&W believes the change in ownership is more of a partnership than an acquisition, saying the two companies are complementary, according to Treadway. He said they viewed the situation as positive for Unicoi County and saw a bright future for commercial uses of uranium.

Johnny Lynch described his gathering with B&W as more of an orientation. He said Winfred Nash, president of B&W's nuclear operations group who conducted the meeting, seemed to be interested in the school system and education overall.

Because students are potential future employees, they used that for their basis to say that they're very much interested in making sure that they have a good education out here, he said.